

ETHNICITY WITHOUT NATIONALISM:  
THE NEWARS OF NEPAL

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IN A RECENT article D.N. Gellner has described in some detail the historical and sociological characteristics of the self-definition of the identity of the Newars of Nepal \*. While it is difficult to find fault with the descriptions of the individual elements which make up Gellner's composition, yet one is left with an impression that these very elements belie the 'strong sense of ethnic identity' which he proposes, albeit restricted to 'the young and educated Newars of the three cities' (p. 119).

In this paper I wish to argue that for the population as a whole (as opposed to a small band of committed revivalists) the sense of Newar ethnicity is relatively weak and has always been so. The straightforward reason for this is the fundamentally divisive nature of caste and the particular way in which caste operates in Newar society—encouraging the formation of strong local groups and militating against the formation of wider groupings whether these might be based on territory, religion, caste, language or some other cultural carrier of ethnicity.

In spite of the fact that Newars are seen by other groups in Nepal as a very distinct ethnic category and see themselves as such, it is virtually impossible to conceive of 'Newariness' being translated into a vehicle for political action in the way that ethnicity is so often manipulated in the contemporary world. This is all the more surprising given the politically subordinate role that Newars have had to play for the last two centuries since their conquest by the founders of the ruling dynasty.

Let us recapitulate some salient characteristics of Newar society. The Newar homeland is the Kathmandu Valley, a circular bowl surrounded by Himalayan foothills, which houses the capital city, Kathmandu, and has been for over two hundred years the administrative and economic centre of the Nepalese state.

The Kathmandu Valley is dominated by the three medieval towns of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur: until 1768 each of these was the centre of a small Newar kingdom. Dotted around the Valley are a number of smaller, mainly agricultural settlements, some inhabited by Newars, others by Nepali-speaking Brahmins and Chetris or by Tamangs, a distinct ethnic group with a Tibeto-Burman language.

Simply by looking at a good map of the Kathmandu Valley, one can immediately distinguish Newar settlements from non-Newar. The former always appear as tight clusters, the latter as scattered villages or hamlets. The non-Newar settlements are of relatively recent origin and date from the conquest of the Valley in 1769 by Prithvi Narayan Shah, king of Gorkha, then a hill principality some eighty kilometers to the west.

\* David GELLNER, Language, caste, religion and territory. Newar identity ancient and moderne, *Archives européennes de sociologie*, XXVII (1986), 102-138.

## THE NEWARS OF NEPAL

These Gorkhalis were Hindus, mostly from the Chetri (Kṣatriya) caste, though they were supported in their military expansionism by non-Hindu hill tribes, particularly Magars and Gurungs who were later to form the backbone of the British Gurkha brigade. By the end of the eighteenth century Nepal's borders were more or less as they are today and the Gorkhalis, whose mother language is now called Nepali, have remained the dominant political force ever since. The descendants of Prithvi Narayan Shah have provided the kings of Nepal down to the present day while a small number of aristocratic Chetri lineages have successfully monopolised the most important positions in the government.

According to the 1971 census (see ESCAP 1980), Nepali speakers composed 45.7 % of the Valley's population, Newars 46 %. For the country as a whole Nepali speakers account for about half of the 16 million population. In comparison the Newars are a very small minority: in 1971 there were 454,979 Newari speakers throughout the kingdom. Of these approximately 285,000 were recorded as living in the Kathmandu Valley with the remainder scattered east and west, mostly in small bazaar towns. These figures should be treated with caution. It is not unknown for census takers to record the first language as Nepali even when this was not so in order to demonstrate that Nepali was 'the national language'. It is also the case that many Newars, particularly outside the Valley, today speak Nepali so that language is not always a faithful indicator of ethnicity. The true figure for Newars is almost certainly higher.

Newar villages are always easily distinguishable. Even the smallest have something of an urban character, their red-brick houses, three or more storeys high, tightly packed together on either side of narrow streets and alleys. Density of population immediately sets them apart from the scattered villages of other ethnic groups in the Valley or elsewhere in the middle hills of Nepal. While many Newar settlements contain only a few thousands, some a few hundreds, their urban quality is readily understood from the architecture and instantly recognised by everyone who visits the Kathmandu Valley:

*Le trait dominant du caractère névar, c'est le goût de la société. Le Névar ne vit jamais isolé ; il aime à loger, un peu comme le Parisien, dans des maisons à plusieurs étages et grouillantes de population [...] Il sait jouir de tous les plaisirs que la nature lui donne (Lévi 1905 : 248).*

Of course it is not simply a genetic sybaritic tendency which accounts for this peculiarly Newar addiction to urban society. Perhaps it should be stressed that it *is* a peculiarly Newar trait in this region. Non-Newars in the middle hills of Nepal tend to live in dispersed settlements. Indeed it is not just in Nepal's middle ranges but throughout most of the Indian subcontinent that the traditional pattern of settlement has been in small dispersed villages. Among Thakalis in the northern Thak Kola region of Nepal there are settlements which bear some resemblance to Newar

towns but nothing which matches the wealth of artisanry (1). The proliferation of temples and shrines, decorated with delicate woodcarving and artwork, are perhaps the Valley's most prominent features; what is not worthy is that intricate woodwork and masonry are not just found in the old palaces and temples but in ordinary houses also while elaborate stone shrines abound in every courtyard.

The means to sustain the religious wealth of the Newar towns was twofold: agriculture and trade. The soil in the Kathmandu Valley is exceptionally fertile and capable of yielding up to three crops per year every year. Many of the smaller Newar towns were clearly built on high ridges above the best cultivable rice land and the three main cities are thought to have emerged as agglomerations of smaller settlements sited in the same way (2).

Density of population was a direct consequence of the exceptionally fertile land which permitted a relatively self-sufficient community. This in turn was consolidated by the strategic position of the Kathmandu Valley for trade. Nepal was not simply the frontier of two great cultures; it also contained the major trade routes between India and Tibet, and Kathmandu became, from the seventh century onwards, the most important entrepôt for trade in the Himalayan foothills.

Apart from Kathmandu itself, where recent 'development' has spawned very high rents and a minor middle class suburban exodus, there has been little change in traditional residence patterns. Whether in the towns or villages, Newars cluster together and in ritual or marriage (though not in business, politics, education or government employment) they have virtually no contact with members of other ethnic groups. Indeed, for Newars residence is a singularly important element of social identity and outsiders (including other Newars) are always viewed with suspicion. 'The Newar of the Valley views social relationships against a background of clearly defined spatial entities' (Fürer-Haimendorf 1956: 36) to the extent that citizens of other towns are not regarded as kin even if they have the same clan name and are believed to be descended from common stock. In a very fundamental way each Newar town is, to a large extent, an autonomous social and ritual unit:

Jusqu'à présent, la force de la tradition et les règles sociales ont maintenu une cohésion profonde de la communauté villageoise [...] Les *thakāli* [village elders] empêchent l'apparition d'une hiérarchie sociale fondée sur la propriété foncière ou sur la division du travail [...] Pyangaon continue par ailleurs à se défendre contre les influences venues de l'extérieur (Toffin 1977 : 186).

It is not simply village communities which manifest this resistance to outside influence. The hallmark of all the major Newar institutions is the exclusion of outsiders. Until 1768-9 it would appear however that

(1) Doherty (1978) makes a similar point: 'In the tight clustering of their houses the Newars resemble their neighbours to the north and of northern origin'.

(2) See Hosken (1974: 34) and Korn (1979: 8). It is also likely that defence was a consideration in building dwellings on high, not easily accessible ground.

immigrants into the Valley were somehow absorbed into Newar society, though not perhaps with equanimity. We know, for example, that a small farming sub-caste on the southern edge of the Valley were originally *pahārpī* ('hill people') who migrated into the Kathmandu Valley in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see Toffin 1977: 34-6). While accepted today as Newars, they are regarded as an inferior sub-caste of the main farming caste (Jyāpu) by other members of that caste in the surrounding area. It is known too that the Malla kings, who ruled the Valley until its conquest, imported Brahmins from India and that many of the courtly lineages under the Malla kings claim Indian origin.

In any case, if acceptance into the Newar fold, through the replication of local ways and institutions, had been possible prior to 1768, the arrival of Prithvi Narayan Shah and his military entourage abruptly ended it. This was not because the conquerors were universally shunned by the Newar community. On the contrary the Newar king of Bhaktapur had embraced them in order to strengthen his own position against the other two kings in the Valley. This policy quickly backfired as Bhaktapur was absorbed into the new kingdom of Nepal and the erstwhile king was forced to flee.

The Gorkhali conquest was particularly welcomed by the Newar merchant community of the Kathmandu Valley. The Valley had been blockaded by the Gorkhali since 1762 and this now ended.

Prithvi Narayan Shah served their interests additionally by expelling Indian traders from the area. Within a few years after the conquest of Kathmandu Valley, we find Newar merchants trading even in the interior western hill regions, as physical and political obstructions to trade were eliminated as a result of political unification. Moreover, a centralized administration enabled Newar merchants and financiers to diversify their operations [...] In addition, Newar traders were able to renew their traditional trading operations with Tibet (Regmi 1971: 11).

There was, it seems, a relatively easy alliance between Newar money and Gorkhali might and it was in many cases through Newar traders and administrators that the state consolidated its position:

Un grand mouvement d'émigration s'organise : les Néwar quittent la 'Vallée' et vont s'installer dans les collines, le long des routes commerciales et dans les centres administratifs. Il n'y aura donc pas de véritable résistance au nouveau régime ; les Néwar, bien au contraire, vont collaborer étroitement avec les Gorkhali et vont aider à unifier le pays (Toffin 1877 : 14).

The alliance between certain sections of the Newar community and the Gorkhalis was also felt in the political centre in Kathmandu but it was limited. Between 1769 and 1846

the royal palace was the hub of the administrative structure. At that time appointments to most official positions within the palace were the hereditary privilege of various noble, Brahman, and Newar families (Rose & Fisher 1970: 72).

Allowing the more prominent Newars some political leverage within the palace was both a means of defusing Newar opposition and of holding in check some of the powerful Chettri lineages. In terms of caste status, however, the conquerors were not so benevolent towards the Newars whose

addiction to blood sacrifices and consumption of buffalo meat and hard liquor on ritual or festive occasions (which were virtually continuous) they found offensive. In a very general way, Newars were (and continue to be) thought of as an undifferentiated group by the Gorkhali Brahmins and Chetris who lump them together with other 'drinking' castes or ethnic groups without caste such as Gurungs, Tamangs or Rais.

Newars themselves *are* very conscious of their ethnic separateness from other groups. The single most crucial fact in this respect is the existence of their own autonomous caste system. A Newar is also keenly aware of his culture because his language, rituals and institutions set him apart from his neighbours and he will openly contrast the richness of his own cultural heritage with that of the rustic Gorkhalis. In particular one might mention, in connection with this idea of common 'Newariness', numerous calendrical festivals, caste initiation rites, especially mock marriage for pre-pubertal girls (*ighi*) (see Vergati 1982, Allen 1982), membership of socio-religious associations called *guthi* (3) which are common to both Hindu and Buddhist Newars but not found among other ethnic groups in Nepal, and the plethora of religious art and architecture in all of the traditional Newar settlements.

As a preliminary statement about caste, I should say that the Newar system, while emphasising a sense of separateness from other ethnic groups, does, like all caste systems, stress divisions *within* it based on purity.

The ritual hierarchy and its associated ideology of the separation of castes is very strong among Newars and cross-caste marriages or commensality among Valley Newars of different castes, or even sub-castes, are rare. The Newar caste system may be represented schematically by the following figure:

### *The Newar caste hierarchy*

FIGURE 1

		Hindu	Buddhist
I	Priestly castes	Deo Brahmin	Gubhāju/Bare
II	High castes	Chathari Shrestha (4) Pācṭhari Shrestha other 'Shrestha'	Urāy
III	Farmer caste		Jyāpu
IV	Service castes	Painters, potters, oil pressers, barbers, dyers, etc.	
V	Castes from whom water may not be taken	butchers, tailors	
VI	Untouchable castes	sweepers	

(3) *Guthi* (with a retroflex *ṭ*) in Nepali; *guthi* with a dental *t* in Newari.

(4) The Roman transliteration Shrestha

for *Śreṣṭha* is now so common in Nepal that I use it here throughout.

As the table shows, high caste Newars can be divided into two groups: Hindus and Buddhists. The distinction is not altogether a happy one for as Newars themselves point out, and as nearly every ethnographer in the Kathmandu Valley has remarked, Newar Hindus worship deities in the Buddhist pantheon and vice versa, and the main festivals and rituals are common to both.

Nevertheless, the division is not simply a reification imposed by the overzealous, classificatory Western anthropologist. If one asks a Newar if he is a Hindu or a Buddhist, one of two answers will come back. Either the respondent will declare an allegiance to one faith only or he will (putting it simply) say he worships both Buddha and Śiva. Unfortunately the answer cannot always be taken at its face value. The statement 'I am a Hindu', which is now increasingly favoured among the lower castes, is as much a declaration of social and political identity as one of religious commitment. To be a Hindu in Nepal is to share, however obliquely, in the status of those who rule.

These divisions, firstly between Hindus and Buddhists, but much more fundamentally between the various castes, ought then to be one crucial factor in undermining any latent opposition to the Gorkhalis, and indeed they are. But, as I have said, in spite of the Newars' own internal divisions, the invading Gorkhalis, who were more orthodox Hindus—i.e. less addicted to blood, alcohol and festivals—effectively assigned a collectively low status to Newars and put them on a par with tribal groups. For most Newars this was coupled with an effective political subordination such that very few held important political or administrative posts in the centre and they were denied access to the army. Between 1846 and 1950 this subjugation was intensified. During this period the country was ruled (with the king effectively a prisoner in his own palace) by one aristocratic family called Rana. The Ranas confiscated Newar lands dedicated to the upkeep of temples and Newar festivals:

[...] une grande partie des biens fonciers des *guthi* [religious land endowments] Néwar ont en effet été confisqués par la famille royale au lendemain de la conquête Shah (1768), pour financer les armées Gorkha. De 1846 à 1951, les Rana ont également exproprié un grand nombre de terres *guthi* dans la vallée de Kathmandou pour construire leurs palais (Toffin 1975 : 208).

An onslaught was also launched against the Newari language: 'Determined to suppress all creative activities in Newari, the Ranas imprisoned and exiled several Newari writers and poets' (Malla 1979: 141).

The Rana period was not simply anti-Newar; theirs was a policy of vigorous Hinduization. 'This is quite different from Srinivas' concept of Sanskritization which is an indivious attempt at social mobility and integration into the locally dominant form of Hindu culture by adopting the practices of a higher caste. Rana Hinduization in Nepal was not an attempt to raise one caste but to create a unified Hindu state. As such, Sanskritization was legally controlled: for example, it was forbidden for the lowest castes to wear shoes or have tiled roofs. The Rana policy

tolerated no cultural opposition in the political centre and it was particularly directed against Newar Buddhists rather than Hindus. During this period:

*Toute manifestation culturelle est interdite [...] Les Bouddhistes Néwar, désignés comme les dépositaires de l'ancienne culture 'népalaise', sont plus particulièrement visés ; les Rana les forceront à respecter les lois hindoues et à plier à l'autorité des brahmanes (Toffin 1977 : 14).*

In practice there is little to distinguish Hindu Newar from Buddhist Newar with respect to the main life-cycle rituals, though their priests are different and, as a general rule, the Buddhists would claim their ritual to be 'more Newar' than that of the Hindus. Moreover, the Shrestha caste, almost completely Hindu, is the group most often cited as being least concerned with purist traditionalism. The self-declared Buddhist is often stating: 'We are not like those back-sliding Shresthas'.

This stigma does not apply across the board to all Hindu Newars. Many Jyāpus (the Farmer caste) who previously employed Buddhist Gubhājus now use Brahmins and there is believed to be an increasing trend to do so. Sanskritization, in the form of a public adoption of Hinduism and the rejection of other beliefs and practices, is today very widespread in Nepal. Yet no Buddhist Newar would ever suggest that Jyāpus are not 'real' Newars. On the contrary, in spite of the attempted mobility of some among them, they are almost universally cited as the 'typical' Newars.

Why then is the Buddhists' venom directed against Shresthas? The answer, I would suggest, comes in two parts, one of which is historical and the other of relatively recent origin. The first has to do with the precedence Hindus received in political favour under the Newar kings until 1768, the second with the fact that the caste status of many Shresthas has become a widespread subject of dispute in modern times.

The Kathmandu Valley, as far back as historical records can show, has always been ruled by Hindu kings and, in consequence, access to courtly privilege has been heavily dependent on religious allegiance. If one looks at the table of the Newar caste system given above, it appears that there are two parallel hierarchies at the top. In a manner of speaking, the Gubhājus are 'Buddhist Brāhmans' (see Greenwold 1974) and the Urāy the status equivalents of the Shresthas. But this religious equivalence indicated by the table, and which reflects popular ideology, conceals the enhanced position enjoyed by the Shresthas, or at least the upper echelons of the caste, first under the Malla kings (who, since their fall, have themselves been absorbed into the Shrestha category) and later under the Gorkhalis.

From the beginning of the fifteenth century had emerged new families of courtiers picked up from the castes known as the Pradhāna Shreṣṭha which claimed to itself dignity and status of the Kṣatriya clans. Together with the Brāhmaṇa priests, the Rājopādhyāya, these families controlled key posts of the administration, and gained vested interests in the land by acquiring feudal rights over holdings. Sometimes these made and unmade kings and ministers (D.R. Regmi 1965, I: 658).

Inversely, Būddhists and Buddhism suffered, if not always overtly. The Newar caste system had first been systematised, incorporating the Buddhists, by King Jayasthiti Malla in the fourteenth century and the absorption of Buddhists into a caste framework must have been bitterly resented. Today it is part of Newar Buddhist folk history: '[...] several informants told me that it was the Hindu monarch (Jayasthiti) who forced monks to give up their way of life' (Riley-Smith 1982: 28) and 'The Bare view caste as a system imposed upon them rather than something that they have willingly embraced' (*ibid.*: 46; see also Greenwold 1977).

I am not suggesting that Buddhists in Kathmandu or Patan today consciously blame Shresthas for the fourteenth-century corruption of their religion and society. But the conception that they are different somehow from Shresthas has persisted. Its persistence owes much to the period of Rana rule and their zealous Hinduisation:

The Ranas utilized the ideology of caste to validate and reinforce their own political authority and to ensure the political stability of an absolute and autocratic despotism [...] This determined Hinduism had the effect of notably raising the prestige (and of course the tangible rewards) of the Hindu Newars in particular the Shrestha merchants, and of depressing the status of Newar Buddhism, particularly the Gubhaju priests. These Gubhaju family priests found themselves increasingly deserted by their jajmans for their more favoured and influential Brahman competitors (Rosser 1966: 82).

One of the main ways in which this state Hinduization was effected was through a legal code called the Muluki Ain—a kind of charter for giving caste practices the force of law at the national level where previously they had the force only of local custom (5).

The first edition of this code was brought out in 1854 and virtually ignored the internal hierarchy of the Newars. Only the Newar Brahmins and unclean castes were allotted a specific position and the Newar Brahmins were generally (the code is not always consistent) placed below the Chettri caste of the Gorkhalis. During the Rana period, the Muluki Ain was modified several times 'always in the direction of enhanced Hindu orthodoxy' (Joshi & Rose 1962: 12). But it was not just from the kudos of being Hindu that the Shresthas benefited. A few among them were allowed access to the higher echelons of government, something that was denied to the Buddhists:

During the Rana period, government positions were monopolised by some two hundred 'client families' —mostly Kathmandu-based Brāhmaṇs and Kṣatriyas but with a few Newari Shresthas included. These three high-caste groups still provide 80-90 per cent of the bureaucracy (Rose & Fisher 1970: 70).

The net effect of the post-Gorkhali political and cultural repression was that Newars turned in on themselves. It is only after 1769 that 'Newar' designates someone who speaks Newari. Before it had a spatial

(5) See Höfer (1979) for a very thorough examination of the 1854 edition of the *Muluki Ain*.



connotation: an inhabitant of the Valley of Nepal (nowadays usually called the Kathmandu Valley). Exclusivity was maintained in a number of ways. Language was one: newcomers now learned the language of the conquerors, Nepali (earlier often called Gorkhali), today the national language and *lingua franca*. Newari remains the first language of nearly all Newars living in or near the Valley. The exceptions, most frequently from the Shrestha caste, are either those with upwardly mobile aspirations in Kathmandu or Patan or traders and peasants settled outside the Valley whose contact is more often with members of other ethnic groups. These two groups tend more and more to speak Nepali.

Thus language also divides Newars internally and not only by distinguishing the Newari-speakers from Nepali-speakers. Within Newari there are considerable dialectal differences from one town to the next and Newars constantly use this as a means of making invidious comparisons: the people of the city refer to the hick status of the villagers while those from one city claim their language to be more pure than that of another.

It is kinship and marriage, through the idiom of caste, which are however the most important means of exclusivity. In theory, and still very much in practice, Newars marry Newars not only of their caste but of the local sub-caste. By 'local' I mean usually within half an hour's walk and often much less. This is because the caste credentials of a local spouse will be public knowledge and there is no risk that one's neighbours or other sub-caste members will have reason to suspect the pedigree of the spouse—as they might with a stranger.

Caste identity is indicated both by previous marriage alliances and by membership of two associations with the generic title of *guṭhi*. Membership in both of these associations is compulsory for all Newar households or has been until very recently. In Kathmandu and Patan there appears to have been a certain breakdown in these traditional associations among more mobile sections of the population but the exact extent of this is still unclear.

The first association, *deo pūjā guṭhi*, is a grouping of agnatic kin whose main function is to worship a lineage deity called *digudyo* and it comprises all the households of a local lineage. The second, *śī guṭhi*, is an association of caste fellows who have a mutual responsibility for ensuring that funerals are correctly carried out. Generally it groups together all the households in a number of lineages who are recognised as having the same caste status in a particular locality. I have been told in Kathmandu that members may be drawn from different castes but personally know of no case where this is so. There is a specific prohibition on intercaste membership in Dhulikhel though in Kathmandu it is common among Shresthas for members of the *śī guṭhi* to come from different grades of that caste.

Since the primary criterion of membership in the *deo pūjā guṭhi* is birth in a particular lineage, it is not possible to join one. The only exception to this is that married women become members of their husband's *guṭhi* and leave that of their agnates. There is greater flexibility in the

membership of *śī guṭhis*. Essentially they are local organisations which group together different lineages. Dead bodies need to be disposed of quickly and since all the *guṭhi* members are supposed to be present, they should live within close proximity of each other. While it is possible for a newcomer, as representative of his household, to join an existing *śī guṭhi* by paying a fee, he will have to give proof of his caste status and will need to be locally resident for many years before this claim is accepted.

I wrote earlier that Shresthas have a rather tainted reputation in the eyes of the Buddhist Newars. Paradoxically, one of the reasons for this concerns what the Buddhists (and everyone else) see to be an imperfect application of the rules of caste among Shresthas. The connection with the historical pre-eminence of Shresthas is that they became the caste to emulate and, if possible, to join. In theory, of course, mobility is impossible in a caste society. One is born into a caste which has a generally recognised status and that's that. In practice status turns out to have much more flexibility (though not infinitely so) through the manipulation of wealth and power.

There are now a number of documented cases of caste mobility and a discussion about its mechanics. The two most common features described are emulation of the features of a higher caste (Srinivas' term Sanskritization has stuck) and its *social* character. The logic is simple: caste is not an individual attribute. If any individual wishes to improve his standing, he needs to raise the level of the caste to which he belongs. Political or economic manipulation may be legitimated by reference to tradition or text when the caste in question 'really' enjoyed a more elevated position. And the claim will of course be contested, particularly by those on either side in the hierarchy. A change in the status of others is also a statement about one's own relative status.

This collective nature of caste affiliation has deeply affected the identity of Shresthas because, and the trend has increased in recent years, the name Shrestha has been adopted by a great number of people as a surname even though many of these people have no legitimate claim to Shrestha *caste* status. Among Newars surnames can be of two types: those that denote a lineage and those that denote a caste. Lineage names are often well enough known that a person's caste is readily identifiable but this is not always so. Many are local nicknames and they are not always flattering—names of animals for example are common. The greatest proliferation of lineage names occurs, not surprisingly, among the largest castes—Jyāpu and Shrestha. Name changing, a usually not-too-subtle attempt at status elevation, is widespread in certain parts of Nepal. In the east for example many have adopted the name Pradhān, the title of one of the courtly Shrestha lineages under the Malla kings. The practice is not merely confined to, though it is apparently endemic among, eastern hill Newars. In other areas throughout the hills, and in the Kathmandu Valley, Shrestha has become the favourite name to adopt.

The problem then is that many calling themselves Shrestha do not

actually belong to the Shrestha caste. But in a city the size of Kathmandu, where residence is not as fixed as it once was, it is becoming increasingly difficult to judge just who has a legitimate claim. On top of this is the fact that the traditional occupation of the majority of Shresthas is trade and this has brought them to settlements throughout Nepal. Whatever their caste, newcomers have been able to claim Shrestha caste status without anyone's being able to challenge it. The result is an internal suspicion unparalleled in any other Newar caste, and members of other castes are often openly derisory. I have heard many people say that these days anyone calls himself Shrestha.

In spite of this, it has been wrongly believed that there is considerable upward mobility both within and into the Shrestha category. Indeed these reports led Dumont to assert that Newars do not have caste, only status groups (Dumont 1964: 98). There were two reasons for Dumont's assertion. The first was a very convincing article (Rosser 1966) that mobility was rife among Valley Newars, particularly Shresthas because they were the category with the most kudos. The second was the fact, well documented, that there was considerable mobility and bending of caste rules in Newar settlements *outside* the Valley. I have no doubt that this was in fact the case, and continues to be. However, it seems clear that this was possible only because the 'new' bazaars lacked well-defined sub-castes who had the authority to prevent it, a quite different situation from the highly structured society of the Valley.

The argument for the Valley constructed by Rosser ran something like this: wealthy Jyāpus from the cities married their children to poor Shrestha from the villages. At the same time, they enrolled as members of a Shresthas *śī guṭhī* (funeral association) by paying an abnormally high entrance fee to overcome any scruples about caste status. This was possible, the argument continues, (a) because Shresthas have no sanction to prevent it; (b) because of a snowballing effect such that new 'Shresthas' take to marrying and forming funeral associations among themselves; (c) because of urban anonymity.

All of these reasons are open to serious question. Firstly, the Shresthas have the perfect sanction to prevent it—refusal to admit into the *śī guṭhī*. Precisely because the suspicion exists that covert mobility is going on, it is the Shresthas who exhibit the keenest concern with caste rules—i.e., with regard to commensality and connubium. There is no financial advantage from membership of a *śī guṭhī* so little to be gained from extorting a heavy entrance fee from an aspirant member who might ruin the group's reputation. In general then, new members without a scrupulous pedigree will not be admitted.

The snowballing effect is not mobility from one group to another but a fragmentation of the first group. Thus wealthy Jyāpus may seek to call themselves Shrestha and marry only among themselves but they will remain, for all that, Jyāpus as far as other castes are concerned. Rosser nowhere mentions that a precondition for this kind of mobility is a change

of residence (see V. Ligati 1982: 285) for in spite of (c)—the scale of urban living—it is very difficult to live in a Newar settlement and remain anonymous. Caste identity is almost always a matter of public knowledge and *guthi* membership is one reason for this. It is just not possible to opt out of one association and into another of a higher caste. The only possibility is to move to a new settlement and completely sever one's previous lineage and affinal connections. In the small world of the Kathmandu Valley, this is not easy to achieve.

In my opinion the reason for the impossibility of social mobility (at least on any large scale) and the absence of Newar nationalism is one and the same: the residential character of the Newar caste system and adherence to an ideal of isogamy. Before I look at marriage, I should refer briefly to two other explanations for introversion which have been suggested. Secrecy seems to be one of the paramount virtues of Newar society and is found at every level of social organization. Michael Allen has suggested that the tantric distinction between inner and outer is crucial here. The distinction, he says,

is fundamental not only to all forms of Tantricism but to the very fabric of social life. Group membership is commonly defined by ritual initiation and social boundaries are maintained by secrecy and closure. As the individual progresses from initiation to initiation he not only advances upwards on the social ladder but gains access to ever increasingly effective or powerful religious practices, doctrines and icons. For a Newar Buddhist the most basic inner/outer dichotomy is that between tantric and non-tantric [...] (Allen 1975: 55).

While secrecy is undoubtedly fundamental to tantrism, I am reluctant to embrace such an 'intellectualist' theory of society. Tantric initiation rituals are restricted to high-caste Newars, both Hindu and Buddhist. Nevertheless, it remains true that the exclusive spirit of tantric ritual pervades many of the 'ordinary' rituals of all Newars and outsiders are nearly always unwelcome.

Toffin has attempted to explain Newar territorial introversion by the constant internecine conflict among the Malla kings:

Il faut probablement expliquer le rôle prédominant joué par la résidence dans la société Néwar, tant au niveau de la caste, de la lignée que du *guthi*, par l'extrême division politique qui a régné dans la vallée de Kathmandou pendant le Moyen Âge, tout particulièrement de 1480 à 1768. A une époque où les Néwar étaient en plein développement économique, les combats et les querelles incessants entre les trois royaumes Malla de la Vallée (Kathmandou, Patan, et Bhadgaon), les privilèges que chaque roi cherchait jalousement à maintenir sur son territoire ont dû jouer un grand rôle dans la formation des unités sociales (Toffin 1975a: 221).

There are a number of difficulties in relying on this argument alone. Firstly, we do not know whether this conflict was all-out or, as seems more likely, was more a matter of court intrigue. Secondly, the noble families, possibly because they are small in numbers, seem to find it less problematic to marry outside of the locality than do the *pachhari* Shresthas or the Jyāpus (who together make up the bulk of Newar society). Thirdly, even if Toffin's description was accurate for 250 years ago, one would

still need to show by what mechanisms this state of affairs has been maintained.

In my opinion the fact that introversion remains today stems from the concern with caste purity fostered by the state code (Muluki Ain) which was abolished only in 1962 (or more accurately replaced by a constitution guaranteeing equality before the law regardless of caste), coupled with the Newar ideal that marriage should be isogamous. Exactly why this ideal should exist, when the ideal of hypergamy prevails in much of North India, is difficult to say. My hypothesis is that because of the constant flow of outsiders into the Kathmandu Valley, due to its strategic position for trade, marriage was sought locally so that accusations could not be levied that alliances were being made with strangers of unknown status. This became even more important after the Gorkhali invasion when the Newars were obliged to demonstrate the purity of their own sub-castes in the face of their orthodox conquerors.

There are a number of restrictions, based on kinship proximity, on who you can marry. All members of the lineages of one's parents and grandparents are proscribed. Alternatively put, one may not marry into either one's own lineage, the lineage of one's mother's brother, of either parent's mother's brother, or of any grandparent's mother's brother (though in practice the final prohibition seems to apply only if that grandparent is still alive).

The effect of these prohibitions is that the South Indian pattern, which is also isogamous, but is based on cross-cousin marriage, is excluded for Newars. The point about cross-cousin marriage, in this context, is that you are marrying someone who is already your affine and whose status you can therefore be confident of.

Apart from these kinship prohibitions, there are a number of other constraints which limit marriage choices in a *de facto* way: wealth, education, the idea of 'good family' and so on. And, of course, it is not just who you will accept but who you will prove acceptable to. Given these constraints, the problem for Newars is how to marry someone of acceptable status who is not already related by blood or marriage. The Newar answer involves a kind of circular logic which has as its consequence that the territorial expansion of affinal ties is precluded. Acceptable affines are those of the same caste status; those of the same caste status are people with whom we have married before.

Thus the net of potential spouses is limited to the circle of previous affines. The problem now becomes how to marry an affine who is not a real affine in the sense that there is a kinship connection in living memory. (Conveniently, genealogies seem to be very rarely recorded). Some other foolproof criterion has to be introduced. In Dhulikhel, and it would seem in Pyangaon (see Toffin 1977), that criterion is *guthi* membership. It is not just the lineages in one's own *śī guthi* who are acceptable but the lineages in any of the *guthis* of any of one's previous affines. The result is to set up a closed marriage circle with a limited number of parti-

cipating lineages, those who belong to *guthis* which are seen to perform their rituals in the locality. A Newar knows that if someone belongs to a local *guthi* of his caste then he should be an acceptable marriage partner. If a spouse cannot be found locally, the alternative is to find one in another settlement who can be identified as acceptable by a kinsman there.

This tendency to local endogamy has been reported in every ethnography. In Dhulikhel 90 % of men and 95 % of women married in the town itself. Those who married outside had invariably been absent for trade for a prolonged period and had little or no intention of returning to the town. A woman who marries down automatically loses status. A man who marries down keeps his status provided his wife is of clean caste but his children will have problems when they come to marry. Thus in theory and in practice the only way a man or woman can marry up is to change his or her place of residence and pretend to have always had higher status. *Guthi* affiliation and the fact that one's lineage history is carefully checked whenever a marriage is proposed make this virtually impossible.

I mentioned earlier that membership in the two *guthis* is compulsory. Indeed the penalty for abstention has traditionally been excommunication from the sub-caste (6). The obsessive concern with *guthi* membership and the hostility shown to outsiders seems to me only to make sense in terms of the necessity of preserving isogamy. It provides an unambiguous marker of status which is publicly identifiable. This is crucial in an urban environment where anonymity is always a potential threat. The system makes it impossible to remain anonymous in a Newar settlement, however large, unless one does not wish to contract a marriage.

The building up of a local social universe (i.e. one which sets a limit on the territorially neutral mechanisms of kinship and marriage) is reinforced by a strong emphasis on the ritual use of space, in the first place to define the limits of the settlement. External boundaries are marked by protective deities whose jurisdiction does not extend past the town or over those who do not worship them. Periodic rituals include processions which mark out those boundaries and allow only those who reside within them to actively participate (7).

In reality Newar settlements are tied politically, economically and culturally to a wider world and yet, for the people who live in them, this often seems irrelevant. One is obliged to put up with the unfortunate intrusions of tax officials, predatory traders from India or impoverished work-seekers from other ethnic groups. Equally one is compelled to make forays, often extended if one is a trader, into the outside world. But the real stuff of Newar society—of meaningful, as opposed to merely functional, interaction—takes place in one's own settlement and only

(6) This is less true now of the cities of Kathmandu and Patan where the *guthi* system is in a state of imminent collapse.

(7) See especially Gutschow & Kölver (1975) and Barré *et al.* (1981).

with others who belong there in the same way. It is only here that one enjoys full participation in society—membership of household, lineage, *guthi* and caste, access to ritual and, most importantly, to spouses.

While explanation as to why Newars exhibit this kind of territorial introversion may differ, there is at least widespread consensus that it exists. In writing of the role of territory in caste society, Dumont has said:

(1) the ideology ignores territory as such; (2) an ideology which had a place for territory, which valued it, would obviously promote territorial, and hence political unification; (3) caste ideology [...] assumes and upholds political divisiveness (Dumont 1972: 198).

While I take the third of these propositions to be true, the evidence from Newar ethnography shows that the other two propositions need not be true. Rather they show that territory can play a principal role in the local shaping of caste, as a delimiting substitute for cross-cousin marriage—an alternative way of marrying those who are already your affines.

Dumont seems to recognise the importance of territory implicitly in a reference he makes to Mayer's *Caste and kinship in Central India*:

[...] in effect one marries only within a smaller group, territorially limited, which is the 'effective' group with respect to relations within the caste (Mayer, p. 36), and which meets in assembly. This is a purely empirical matter, and this group does not constitute a unit when confronted with others of the same nature which between them constitute the subcaste (Dumont 1972: 220).

The Newar case shows that it is not necessary for the local caste group to meet in assembly, merely to recognise who belongs to it and who does not. Moreover, to belong to a closed marriage circle does not mean that this group—the effective sub-caste—is a corporate group in a political or economic sense.

Richard Fox, in a very stimulating essay which has important consequences for the early history of Newar settlements, shows clear linkages between caste, kinship and territory in North India. Looking at the early formation of small-scale 'urban-like' locales, he draws on Sjöberg's hypothesis that the pre-industrial city depended on a well-established political apparatus and was not simply a commercial centre. He then argues that the groups which stimulated urban development at the local level in North India 'were locally dominant "stratified lineages" claiming Rajput, Bhuihar, or other Kṣatriya identification' (*ibid.* 171).

These 'rurban' settlements were lineage centres which reproduced the political, economic and ritual functions of the state-level pre-industrial cities at the local level. They depended on retainers and specialist services and attracted people 'escaping the uncertainties of the rural areas or the exactions of unscrupulous state revenue authorities' (*ibid.*: 179). These settlements were also fortresses and:

When no more room existed at the fort, the raja or chaudhari settled a cadet line in the villages (usually nearby), so that they could pose no threat to his command.

Often these junior lines began their own urban-like centers. Agricultural pursuits were the main occupational category of such centers (*ibid.*: 170).

If the early history of the Newar towns followed a similar pattern, the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley in 1769 meant the immediate usurpation of political power from the hands of the dominant Newar lineages. Politically and economically Newar settlements were thenceforth subject to the administrative and land taxation arrangements of the Gorkhali state. Ideological introversion however remains and would appear to have grown even more localised since the Gorkhali invasion. The old Newar kingdoms—conglomerates of city and rural hinterland—have disappeared and their earlier existence is now acknowledged only on rare ritual occasions.

The Nepali state effectively (though not deliberately) created a framework which ensured that local allegiances would remain of fundamental importance. It did this in two ways. The first of these was its progressive control over land taxation, which initially disadvantaged Newars (most higher officials in the Rana period were non-Newar and rewarded with land grants), and culminated in the 1964 Lands Act with ceilings on landholdings and greater security for tenants. The state's control over land tenure in consolidating itself has continually reinforced the determination to hold onto land, particularly rice land, because it offers a security not found in other sources of income, whether business or salaried employment. This desire to hold onto land has been an important factor in checking to some extent the population dispersal brought about by recent modernisation.

The second fillip to localisation was given by enshrining the caste system in national law, a situation which was abolished only as late as 1962. The Hindu kingdom of Nepal (the only Hindu kingdom) is not a mere fiction. The ideology of caste is extremely pervasive and has successfully dominated and embraced its competitors—i.e. Buddhism and tribal, shamanistic religions (see Sharma 1978). The Newars already had their own autonomous caste system but were robbed of its political legitimation when their kings were overthrown. Their answer to the Gorkhalis lumping them together as one 'drinking' caste was to increasingly rigidify the criteria of acceptability for status equals. It is this central concern with caste status which militates against a wider spirit of common Newariness which might act as a medium for political opposition to the Gorkhalis, or engender any significant nationalist spirit.

In conclusion, let me return to Gellner's article. Careful comparison will reveal that there are a number of important agreements in our respective arguments. Indeed, at one point (p. 137) Gellner writes that 'the general context of caste and territorial attachment which explains the traditional sense of identity simultaneously explains why the Newari language movement, in spite of its appeal, is so weak and divided'. But whereas this argument is for me overwhelming, Gellner prefers to see the emergence of a new form of ethnicity which is ever more assertive. History alone will judge this question.



There is however a fundamental substantive question on which we disagree and the interpretation of this is crucial for the way in which one understands ethnicity. Gellner contends that in the traditional perspective it is the Shrestha caste, the local representatives of the Kṣatriya *varṇa*, who embody the ideal of Newariness:

It is the Kṣatriyas, i.e. the Śreṣṭhas, who are the paradigmatic Newars on the traditional caste-bound view. All other castes are their priests, artisans, barbers, servants or other specialists. In Dumontian terms, it is the Kṣatriya who encompasses, i.e. stands for, the rest where local ethnic identity is concerned, although of course this whole sphere is subordinated to that of caste-as-purity in which the Brāhmaṇ encompasses all other castes (Gellner 1986: 138).

The point at issue here is that what a Shrestha represents in the traditional system is not the ideal *Newar* but the ideal *Hindu patron*. His point of reference is not ethnicity but caste. He is not seeking to inspire or encompass other castes with a view to promoting a sense of ethnic solidarity; on the contrary, he seeks to establish and uphold his difference from them according to the canons of ritual purity-impurity which underlie the caste system.

As Gellner himself points out (pp. 139-140), the Valley kings 'never claimed that they were Newars. On the contrary, they sought to establish their descent with more prestigious links to India and to the gods'. As he further points out, the label 'Newar' is not used in an ethnic sense before the seventeenth century, i.e. before the threatened, and eventually successful, conquest of the Kathmandu Valley by the Gorkhalis. The sense of Newariness was thus a product of a radically new situation, one which culminated in the establishment of the Nepali nation-state in which the Newars were defined, in the national code, as a *caste* (8). The fact that the people of the Kathmandu Valley had never been *one* caste but had their own highly complex caste system produced a situation in which, for the first time, ethnicity arose.

To speak of ethnic identity before this period is to conflate ethnicity (a specific historical condition) with identity (a generalized sociological condition). One might say that until this time the people of the Valley did not think of themselves as 'the people of the Valley' at all. If they pondered on their identity, which seems unlikely, it would have been as members of caste or kin groups or, at the outside, as members of a kingdom to which they owed allegiance or at least tribute. The pre-Gorkhali history of the Kathmandu Valley is one of political fragmentation where the idea of ethnic identity is irrelevant. While it has become relevant

(8) One should be aware here that there is an important difference in kind between the two tables of caste systems given in Gellner's article. In the first, the traditional Newar system, all castes are linked and have social and ritual responsibilities towards each other. The second is an

invention of the Gorkhalis designed to legitimize their political superiority. Most Newars, even in the hills, have no ritual contacts with non-Newars while hill tribes are precisely that, i.e. tribes—groups without caste—in the Hindu context, uncivilized.

in modern Nepal, it is largely defused both by caste divisiveness and the State's success in propagating a sense of Nepali nationalism. Today it is more important to be Nepali and not Indian, than Newar and not Gorkhali \*

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